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# Basic definitions in personality psychology: challenges for conceptual integrations

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*Commentary*

## Basic definitions in personality psychology:
## Challenges for conceptual integrations

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## Abstract

*Personality psychology is fragmented across heterogeneous subfields each focussing on particular aspects of individuals and from particular paradigmatic perspectives. Attempts for integration into overarching theories as that presented in the target article are therefore important. But the ideas proposed build on vague and often circular definitions of basic terms and concepts that hamper advancement and integration. My critique from philosophy-of-science perspectives pinpoints central problems and presents alternative concepts to help overcome them. A metatheoretical definition highlights the core ideas underlying common personality concepts and opens new avenues for conceptual integration.*

Conceptual integrations presuppose clear definitions of basic terms and concepts. Personality psychology encounters particular challenges because its objects of research are phenomena of daily social life about which every person, including scientists, possesses comprehensive lay-psychological knowledge and vocabulary (Uher, 2011, 2015a). But unlike scientific concepts and terms, everyday concepts and terms are often fuzzy and context-sensitive (Hammersley, 2013) and contain circular explanations (Laucken, 1974; Uher, 2013, 2015b,c). Despite all scholarly efforts, this challenges psychologists' abilities to unambiguously define basic terms and to make explicit their most basic concepts. I applaud the authors for highlighting the necessity of clear definitions and for providing working definitions. But instead of going beyond pre-existing concepts, they adopt vague and circular ideas from previous definitions. More precise terms and definitions may be cumbersome but are of utmost importance to overcome the field's current conceptual disintegration.

### Definition of behaviour
The broad definition of behaviour (Appendix) as "everything an organism does" fails to exclude doings not commonly considered behaviours, such as organisms' metabolism and growth (Millikan, 1993). Including "observable actions, covert actions, cognitions, motivations, and emotions" in the set of phenomena defined as behaviour entails fundamental circularity in explanation, for how can broadly defined behaviours be explained by underlying affections, cognitions and motivations if these phenomena constitute behaviours themselves? Why do we use such different terms at all if not to highlight essential differences among the phenomena they denote (Uher, 2016a)?

### Definition of personality

The same circularity is entailed when defining personality as "a person's characteristic pattern of behaviors in the broad sense (including thoughts, feelings, and motivation)" (Appendix). When patterns in cognition, emotion and motivation form inherent parts of someone's personality, they cannot also serve as explanations. What phenomena other than those included in the definition can explain those conceived as personality? Contradicting their own working definition, the authors discuss various affective, cognitive and motivational processes that may causally contribute to the emergence of personality variation. Given this, what criteria define some psychical phenomena as forming part of personality but others only as their causes or consequences (Uher, in press)? The notion of "characteristic patterns" is surprisingly vague for a scientific definition. When are behavioural patterns "characteristic" enough for an individual to constitute "tendencies" and to warrant their interpretation as personality? That is, what differentiates behaviour from personality (Uher, 2013, 2015a; Uher & Visalberghi, 2016)?

### Definition of structure

The target article mostly defines personality structure as "inter-individual differences" (Part 1), thus clearly denoting a population-level concept. But the working definition (Appendix) also refers to the individual-level concept of organisation "within individuals". The discipline's founder, William Stern (1911), already highlighted essential differences between these two fundamental perspectives on individuals (i.e., differential psychology and personality psychology). The structure of *personality differences* in a population cannot reveal anything about the structure of an individual's *personality* or its underlying causes as the authors ascertain correctly. Clear terminological differentiations are essential to integrate these different structural concepts with concepts of personality processes and development, which inherently occur at the individual level (Uher, 2011, 2015c).

### Definition of process and development

The authors oppose processes and development as different concepts but, at the same time, define processes as implying development (Appendix). The established concepts of microgenesis (Aktualgenese) and ontogenesis may provide more clarity for differentiating developmental processes and a solid theoretical basis for the ideas presented (Diriwächter & Valsiner 2008; Rosenthal, 2002; Uher, 2015c).

### Definition of traits and trait levels

Traits defined as "relatively stable inter-individual differences in the degree/extent/level of coherent behaviors, thoughts, feelings" clearly denote a population-level concept. But traits are also interpreted as internal entities that may share underlying processes (Part 1), thus reflecting an individual-level concept. As the authors state correctly, different underlying psychical and physiological processes may be associated with similar observable behaviours in concrete situations, and vice versa. But given this and given that all of these phenomena together define a "trait", what actually constitutes an individual's "trait level"? Commonly, individuals' trait levels are determined as scores of assessment scales. But assessments are retrospective and memory-based methods. How can they measure individuals' thoughts, feelings and observable behaviours, which are highly fluctuating phenomena that can thus be captured only in the moments in which they occur (Uher, 2013, 2015a; Uher & Visalberghi, 2016)?

These and further fundamental questions of personality psychology were explored by applying the Transdisciplinary Philosophy-of-Science Paradigm for Research on Individuals (TPS Paradigm), a paradigm aimed toward making explicit and scrutinising the most basic assumptions different disciplines make about individuals and the metatheories and methodologies used. It metatheoretically defines and differentiates various kinds of phenomena studied in individuals: morphology, physiology, psyche, behaviours, contexts, semiotic representations (language) and artificial outer-appearance modifications. For

example, behaviours are conceived as phenomena occurring entirely external to individual's bodies that are therefore publicly accessible. Psychical phenomena, by contrast, are conceived as occurring entirely internally that are therefore inaccessible by others (for definitions, see Uher, 2015a, 2016a,b).

The paradigm's frameworks were used to elaborate a metatheoretical definition of personality that embraces the ideas contained in previous definitions. It highlights that the central idea of personality concepts is individual specificity for which clear criteria are elaborated and that is studied in the various kinds of phenomena explored in individuals. This definition allows researchers to specify the particular phenomena in which they study individual specificity rather than using the abstract personality label uniformly for phenomena of very different kinds, thereby obscuring vital differences. Researchers can also specify which phenomena they explore as study phenomena and which as their causes or consequences, thus avoiding the circularity contained in previous personality definitions (Uher, in press, 2013, 2015a,c).

The TPS Paradigm highlighted that meaningful conceptual integrations require individual-specific structures and processes to be identified and categorised using between-individual and within-individual approaches complementarily and step-wise (the so-called Hourglass-shape methodology). The configurational and process structures of individual-specific variations, *identified separately* in each given kind of phenomenon (e.g., behaviour, psyche, physiology), are then set in relation to one another to identify functional and causal interrelations as well as patterns of longitudinal development (Uher, 2015b,c).

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